

violence and bloodshed during the reign of unfortunate Mary; and it was with infinite impatience she awaited his arrival to present him to the bride who was to restore the fortunes of Strathfillan; delighted too at the impatience her son manifested, in the letter which announced his departure, to see her dear face and the old place again. But in those days posts and packets were slow, or at all events uncertain. There were long delays, and the Countess presently began to notice that Helen Stewart, the lovely and penniless girl whom she had sheltered under her roof when her father, Lord Auchintyre, fell at the battle of Pinkie, seemed to know a great deal, in some mysterious way, about the movements of Lord Strathfillan, her cousin. Helen Stewart knew when the young lord had seen King Eric, when he was to meet his uncle, and how he was to journey from the camp to the Court at Helsingfors, while she, his loving, anxious mother, had most meagre tidings. So the Countess watched, and one fine day, when a carrier from Inverness brought a mail to the castle, she had the packets and letters brought to her room, and came upon most tender, loving epistles addressed to 'My only sweetheart and dearest love, Helen,' signed 'Your ever loving Angus.' She rushed to the girl's room, the tapestried turret, blind with rage. 'You false, scheming hussy! Beggar that you are! how dare you? You to be the wife of Strathfillan! But I will spoil your game. Off you go this instant to your aunt's charge at Montpelier. In an hour, do you hear?'

Helen Stewart—pale, proud, and defiant—stood with folded arms.

'Never!' she exclaimed. 'I swore to Angus that I would never leave this castle of his till he returned to make me its mistress. In the eye of Heaven we are man and wife!'

The old woman's fury knew no bounds.

'You shall go this instant, hussy! See if you do not!'

At her summons half a score of gillies entered the room.

'Take Mistress Helen Stewart down to the court, and let her be brought at once, when her pack is ready, to the convent at Beaulieu. You had better, Helen, obey at once.'

'No, aunt, I'll keep my vow!'

The gillies advanced to seize her. Helen rushed to the door which opened on the steps to the court, seized the bolt, and sought to force it back. The savage old *châtelaine*, drawing a poniard from her belt, chopped at the wrist of the girl as she grasped the handle of the door with such force that the keen blade nearly severed the wrist. The servants bore the poor victim, bleeding to death, to the court; in moving her the hand dropped on the floor! Helen Stewart never left the castle alive. Then came remorse—too late. Angus of Strathfillan was lost at sea in the great storm in which so many vessels were wrecked on the coast of Caithness in the same year.

The Countess of Strathfillan was tried and found guilty of wounding 'to the effusion of blood,' but a great lady had little to fear from the sentence of a court of law at a time when Scotland was convulsed with the bloody feuds between the partisans of Mary and her ferocious nobles, and justice was not done.

She was allowed to escape to France, and was finally pardoned by the Regent Murray. But the story of the death of her niece was handed down, and the castle was regarded with superstitious fear among the people, who believed the falling fortunes of the house were associated with Helen Stewart's fate. The castle was deserted for several generations by the family, but on the suppression of the rising of 1745 the representative of the line made it his residence. The room in the tower was occupied occasionally; now and then it was said that those who were quartered there were subjected to unpleasant visitations, but these were by no means invariable. I cannot solve the mystery of my own experience. I received afterwards, from each of the gentlemen at the castle, his assurance, on his word of honour, that he had not left his room on the night when I was subjected to the ordeal. I shall certainly never forget 'the Dead Hand.'

W. H. RUSSELL.